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A Potentially Less Toxic Cigarette Gets National Push

Vector Tobacco Ads Cite Decrease In Carcinogens, but Impact On Health Remains Unclear

By Gordon Fairclough
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

Vector Tobacco Ltd. is about to become the first cigarette maker to market a potentially less hazardous smoke nationwide.

Issues of People magazine hitting newsstands this week contain a two-page advertising spread from Vector that touts the new cigarette, called Omni, with the slogan: "Reduced carcinogens. Premium Taste." The ad says that Omni was created to "significantly" cut levels of chemicals that are the "major causes of lung cancer" in smokers. "Now there's actually a reason to change brands," it says.

Vector's strategy already is drawing fire from antismoking activists, public-health experts and some of its larger rivals in the cigarette business, who say the ads are misleading. "Everything is designed to imply this cigarette is safer, with Vector having no proof whatsoever that this is the case," says Matthew L. Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a Washington advocacy group. "That has the potential to cause serious harm to consumers."

The whole notion of a less-hazardous cigarette is controversial. Proponents say it would be wrong not to try to reduce the harm caused by smoking, which contributes to more than 400,000 deaths a year in the U.S. But some antitobacco activists worry that the newfangled cigarettes will discourage smokers from quitting and possibly entice nonsmokers to light up.

Some public-health experts predict the current round of tobacco-company innovations will ignite a marketing free-for-all reminiscent of the "tar derby" of the 1950s. At that time, cigarette makers, seeking to counter mounting fears about the health consequences of smoking, started adding filters, reducing tar content and making unfounded claims. One Liggett ad of that era said a new product, filter-tipped L&Ms, were "Just what the doctor ordered."

The tobacco in the Omni cigarette is treated with a combination of chemicals, including palladium, a metal most commonly found in the catalytic converters of cars. Vector says that treatment, combined with a new, carbon-filled filter, has resulted in a cigarette that tastes as good as competitors' brands but has lower levels of a number of toxic and cancer-causing compounds.

Vector, which is owned by Vector Group Ltd. of Miami, the parent of discount- cigarette maker Liggett Group, acknowledges there is no scientific proof that these reductions will make its cigarettes any less dangerous than the average Marlboro or Camel. It has yet to complete any human or animal tests of the effects of smoking the new cigarettes. In an open letter to be published in magazines and newspapers, Vector's chief executive, Bennett S. LeBow, writes that "there is no such thing as a safe cigarette, and we do not encourage anyone to smoke." But, he adds: "We strongly believe that if you do smoke, Omni is the best alternative."

"We're doing what we have to do to do the right thing," Mr. LeBow says. "If we have this technology, we have to come out with it. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I were sitting on this."

Other companies are rushing to produce cigarettes with lower levels of toxins. Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp., the nation's third-largest cigarette maker and a unit of British American Tobacco PLC, today is starting to sell a potentially less hazardous smoke, known as Advance, in a test market in greater Indianapolis. Scientists at industry giant Philip Morris Cos.' Richmond, Va., research labs are racing to complete work on their own less-toxic cigarettes.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Holdings Inc., meanwhile, is testing its unconventional Eclipse cigarette, which primarily heats tobacco instead of burning it, in Dallas. The maker of Winston and Camel cigarettes last year released scientific studies that it said indicate Eclipse -- which doesn't burn down like a regular cigarette and hasn't found much of a following among smokers -- may be less likely to cause cancer and other diseases.

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Tobacco companies already are making a welter of claims. Reynolds's ads for Eclipse say the cigarette is "the next best choice" to quitting. Ads for Brown & Williamson's Advance, which are to run soon in copies of People, Time and other magazines distributed only in Indiana, use the slogan: "All of the taste . . . Less of the toxins." Brown & Williamson says that Advance uses specially cured tobacco and a new, three-part filter to reduce levels of a broad range of carcinogens and other toxins in smoke.

The ads are introducing smokers to a bewildering lexicon of toxic compounds found in their cigarettes. Vector's ads refer to reductions in carcinogenic PAHs, nitrosamines and catechols. Packs of Brown and Williamson's Advance come with fliers listing 42 toxic substances identified by the Massachusetts state health department, including hydrogen cyanide, benzene and formaldehyde.

Sorting this out won't be easy. There are no government standards for what constitutes a potentially less hazardous cigarette, or how such a product can be marketed. The Food and Drug Administration doesn't have jurisdiction over cigarettes.

Vector says that its palladium catalyst reduces various cancer-causing compounds known as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs, by 15% to 60%. It also cuts down on a tobacco-specific nitrosamine, known as NNK, that is considered an especially potent lung carcinogen. Levels of another nitrosamine, however, aren't reduced. The filter removes nearly all the benzene from the cigarette's smoke and also makes significant cuts in other chemicals, Vector scientist Robert Bereman says.

Vector's ads don't mention the addition of palladium. Tony Albino, a longtime cancer researcher who is the company's vice president for public-health affairs, says the amount of the metal inhaled by smokers is insignificant and poses no health risk.

"It sounds as though these cigarettes may in fact deliver lower amounts of some of these carcinogens. Based on what we know, you would think that would be a good thing," says Stephen S. Hecht, a chemist who studies cancer prevention at the University of Minnesota Cancer Center. But, he says, scientists don't know enough to say whether the reductions are large enough to make a significant health difference.

---- INDEX REFERENCES ----

COMPANY (TICKER): British American Tobacco Plc (Ads); R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Holdings Inc.; British American Tobacco Plc; Vector Group Ltd. (BTI RJR U.BRT VGR)

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